

Effective Business Writing: Top Principles and Techniques

“My success was not just because of hard work.”

Porter Gale, author of *Your Network is Your Net Worth*, in a Forbes [interview](#), revealed that much of her success can be attributed to relationships she made throughout the years. She stressed that one's “net worth” is not anchored on the size of one's portfolio or network but on the quality of affairs and on one's “ability to define and stay true to your passions and values and that working with other people who share them will allow you to build a strong and enduring interpersonal safety net that will carry you through any financial calamity to greater output and personal fulfillment.”



[Image source](#)

Indeed, communication is the soul of any business.

It serves as both the content and channel for one's decisions, ideas, tasks, solutions, plans, and need to belong and solidify your sense of culture and self. In fact, a Towers Watson [study](#) attests that companies that communicate with courage, innovation, and discipline are more effective at engaging employees and producing ideal business outcomes.

One type of communication that is used almost everyday in the corporate world is **business writing**: from emails, memos, new policies and instructions to huge client presentations, research and development, and marketing campaigns. Even profit-making and nonprofit organizations in the field of aeronautics, according to a survey by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), are into communication the whole time. It says respondents use:

- more than one third of their work time conveying information to others
- another one third working with technical information sent to them by others

Fundamentally, poor business writing is costly and leads to disastrous events. A Los Angeles Business journal [article](#) explained that billions of dollars are lost due to insufficient writing skills among business people. It happens, for example, when a customer does not understand the email, marketing tool, or proposal by a company because of wrong grammar or awkward style and tone. The article adds that customers encountering poorly written materials might form an undesirable impression of how a company runs its business.

This post is a part of a series of guides on business writing. Today, we will tackle:

- Definition of Business Writing
- Advantages and Disadvantages of Written Communication
- Elements to Consider Before Writing A Business Document
- Grammar and Language in Business Writing
- Different Types of Business Communication

What is Business Writing?



[Image source](#)

Business Writing is a type of **written communication**, usually with standard structure and style. According to the Capella University, it addresses the needs of specific audiences and has prose and lists for a particular topic that concerns business.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Written Communication

The Inc Magazine [website](#) details what makes written communication work...and worse:

Pros

1. written messages do not have to be delivered on the spur of the moment; they can be edited and revised several times before they are sent so that the content can be shaped to maximum effect
2. written communication provides a permanent record of the messages and can be saved for later study
3. written forms of communication also enable recipients to take more time in reviewing the message and providing appropriate feedback
4. written forms of communication are often considered more appropriate for complex business messages that include important facts and figures
5. good writing skills often lead to increased customer/client satisfaction; improved inter-organizational efficiency; and enhanced image in the community and industry

Cons

1. the sender of written communication does not generally receive immediate feedback to his or her message; this can be a source of frustration and uncertainty in business situations in which a swift response is desired
2. written messages often take more time to compose, both because of their information-packed nature and the difficulty that many individuals have in composing such correspondence

To prevent such disadvantages, there are principles and techniques that people can apply.

Elements to Consider Before Writing A Business Document

1) *The Purpose*. This will serve as the direction, the reference, and the path of your details. This will set the tone, the style, and structure of your letter. This is your message and your goal. Defining your purpose will set things right at the very beginning. For example, if your purpose is to excite and invite the employees to join the annual talent contest of the company as a team-building effort, you cannot bore them with long paragraphs explaining how the activity will help boost their productivity, write too formal sentences, or use heavy office or work jargon. The purpose tells you to keep your lines light yet still professional, use bullets, and add an exclamation point or two at the end of the memo.

To determine how the document will appear, it is only critical to ask yourself first if your purpose is:



[Image source](#)

- to inform
- to persuade
- to argue
- to invite
- to confirm information
- to make an inquiry
- to ask for approval
- to reject or approve
- to propose or suggest

2) *The Audience*. Another significant step in order to make an impact on your audience is to know them. For example, if you simply send a letter to employees about attending a conference on a Sunday and reiterating that it is a requirement, a portion of your workforce might resume to work with worries in their heads because they have religious obligations to meet on Sundays. If you can tailor your letter without touching any religion, culture or sensitive issue in an uncomfortable way, work would be much smoother and solidarity among the people will remain intact.

Here are methods you can take to know your audience better:

- If you are sending an external communication to a company, determine its vision, its mission, its accomplishments and goals. If your letter reflects these things, the company would realize that you care both for its objectives and its situation. Gather these data using the company's website, social media networks, and other corporate paraphernalia.

- If you are sending a proposal to an individual, know his/her preferences, pain, problem or wants. If you can answer one or two of them in your letter (sales, marketing, proposal, etc), it will make your document more interesting and more memorable.
- You can also take a look at the company's communication style through its public documents and press releases. This way, you know how you should convey your message to them.
- A Business Insider [article](#) suggests the following guide questions as you develop your writing:

1. Why does the reader care?
2. How does the reader benefit?
3. What should the reader do?
4. When should the reader do it?
5. What happens if the reader does take action?
6. What happens if the reader *doesn't* take action?
7. Who else will benefit? Why?
8. Where does the reader go for more information?

Grammar and Language in Business Writing



[Image source](#)

iFixit CEO Kylie Wins, in his controversial [post](#) at the Harvard Business Review blog, claims that “grammar signifies more than just a person’s ability to remember high school English. I’ve found that people who make fewer mistakes on a grammar test also make fewer mistakes when they are doing something completely unrelated to writing — like stocking shelves or labeling parts.” He furthers that in his company where programming, like writing, is crucial, “the devil’s in the details. In fact, when it comes to my whole business, details are everything. I hire people who care about those details.” For clients or partners, language may echo a company’s competence, culture, openness to development, and way of treating business. Hence, there is a need to prevent [grammatical errors and inappropriate writing in business communication](#).

On words, phrases, and sentences

The book “Effective Business Communication,” by Ronnie Bouing, suggests that complex and general nouns and wordy lines should be avoided. There should be less jargon—unless it is a technical document—and more specific words and brief yet strong phrases. Let’s take a look at his examples:

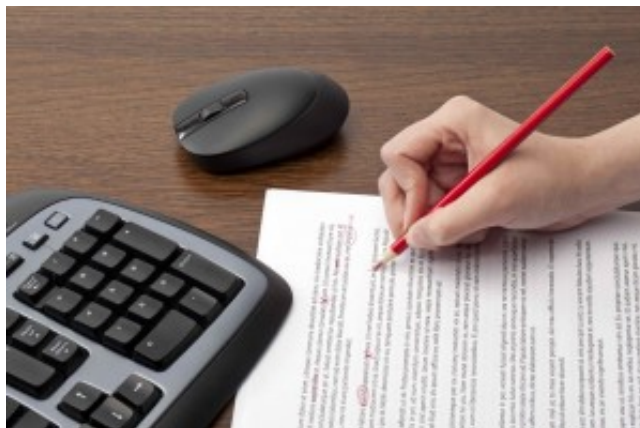
- instead of “wealthy business person,” use “tycoon.”
- not “business prosperity,” but “boom”
- not “consensus of opinion,” but “consensus”
- not “kind consideration,” but “kindness” or “consideration”
- not “as a result of,” but “because”
- not “at the present time,” but “now”

The Miami University presents the following pointers:

- Turn nouns into verbs: Instead of “We would like to make a recommendation that...” say “We recommend that...”
- Refrain from overusing “it is” and “there are”: Not “It is imperative that we examine this...” but “We examine...”
- Avoid the use of fancy terms and stick to simple ones: Not “utilize” but “use”
- Be cautious with pronoun reference. For example, to which is “this” referring to in this sentence “This is the reason behind the company’s restructuring.” If this is placed at the end of the paragraph, anything in your previous sentences can serve as a reason. Be as definite and as clear as possible.

Here are other tips for better business writing:

1. Use the active voice instead of the passive voice to sound more assertive and powerful. For example, not “The report was submitted by the team lead to the CEO,” but “The team lead submitted the reports to the CEO.”
2. For the tone, the [Purdue University](#) emphasizes the need to be confident, sincere and courteous. Its example suggests that instead of saying “You must agree that I am qualified for the position,” write “My qualifications in the areas of accounting and customer service meet your job requirements.”
3. The Purdue University also explains how to apply parallelism in professional writing. For example, if a series of items starts with a verb, the rest of the lines should start with a verb as well: “duties: analyze data; call clients; write reports”



[Image source](#)

The Pepperdine University – Graziado School of Business and Management lists the action words one can use in professional writing:

Achieve	Coordinate	Exceed	Judge	Prepare	Review
Acquire	Correct	Execute	Justify	Prescribe	Revise
Adapt	Counsel	Exhibit	Launch	Present	Revitalize
Address	Craft	Expand	Lead	Preside	Satisfy
Advance	Create	Expedite	Lecture	Process	Schedule
Advise	Critique	Experiment	License	Procure	Secure
Advocate	Decrease	Export	Listen	Program	Select
Analyze	Define	Facilitate	Locate	Progress	Separate
Apply	Delegate	Finalize	Maintain	Project	Serve
Appoint	Deliver	Finance	Manage	Project	Manager
Arbitrate	Demonstrate	Forge	Manipulate	Promote	Simplify

Architect	Deploy	Form	Manufacture	Propose	Sold
Arrange	Design	Formalize	Map	Prospect	Solidify
Ascertain	Detail	Formulate	Market	Provide	Solve
Assemble	Detect	Found	Mastermind	Publicize	Specify
Brief	Discover	Halt	Modify	Rate	Structure
Budget	Dispense	Head	Monitor	Realign	Succeed
Build	Display	Hire	Motivate	Rebuild	Suggest
Calculate	Distribute	Honor	Navigate	Recapture	Summarize
Capture	Diversify	Hypothesize	Negotiate	Receive	Supervise
Catalog	Divert	Identify	Nominate	Recognize	Supply
Champion	Document	Illustrate	Normalize	Recommend	Support

On overall grammar editing

The [Harvard Business Publishing](#) details ways to edit grammar and mechanics:

- 1) Revise lengthy titles: Instead of “Bob Smith, Vice President for Corporate Communications and Government Relations,” write “spokesperson Bob Smith”
- 2) Be keen with obvious points: Instead of “Obviously, this means we will need to raise prices, which could reduce sales,” prefer “Our need to raise prices could reduce sales.”
- 3) Instead of using “of” phrases, convert them into possessives. “For example, change the success of the company to the company’s success.”



[Image source](#)

On formatting

The Harvard Business Publishing describes the graphical elements one should consider when developing a business document:

Headings and bullets – Headings are used to underscore the main points, form white space, and make it easy for readers to scan the document. Bullets, on the other hand, are often for series of items. They are useful because a huge volume of data can be converted into “small, digestible bites,” making the reading experience smooth and the paper easier to navigate.

Tables – These are used when subjects or options are being compared or contrasted to one another. These tools will avoid the repetition of the company names and categories throughout the text. There would be less words because the data no longer needs extensive explanation.

Maps, flowcharts, and diagrams – These are for more complex data or connections of data that text alone can no longer detail substantially. These also aid in presentations, saving more time and other resources.

Bold face and italics – To emphasize specific points to readers , you can put the words in boldface or in italics.

On using sources

The Miami University gives pointers for acknowledging sources in business documents, especially those that present proposals:

- a) Readers should be able to identify sources. State full URLs, names of websites, and authors' names using a consistent citation method.
- b) Avoid using direct quotes and instead paraphrase them or state them in your own words. This will also give the impression that you have a solid grasp of the evidence for your proposals.
- c) Provide explanation for outside materials so readers will not come up with an interpretation that is different from yours.
- d) Use only persuasive and credible sources. This will make your document more reliable and convincing.

On content development and organization of ideas

Ideas in your business should flow in a logical manner to keep the whole discussion smooth and all thoughts cohesive. The Purdue University has guide questions for reviewing professional papers

- Does your document begin by explaining your point and forecasting the communication's main ideas? Your introduction should answer these three questions from the perspective of the reader:
 1. What is this?
 2. Why am I getting it?
 3. What do you want me to do?
- Does your communication proceed in a logical and organized way, moving from general to specific information?
- Is information arranged in order of importance to your audience?
- Is similar information kept together?
- Is each section organized around only one main idea?
- Do key sentences begin each paragraph?

For content development, you can ask the following as you re-check your content:

- Do you provide enough background information for the message?
- Have you included specific examples, numbers, dates, names and percentages to support your claims?
- Do you have graphics (charts, graphs, diagrams, and tables) where appropriate?
- Have you eliminated unnecessary and/or obvious information to your audience?

Types of Business Communication



[Image source](#)

Barbie Carpenter of Demand Media, a digital marketing agency, in an [article](#), shares the four types of business communication:

- 1) *Results-Oriented Communication*. This type of correspondence encourages people, especially those in the office, to take actions or follow specific instructions. An example of this is a memo with the weekly goals of a team. It is expected to be motivational to produce solid results.
- 2) *Informational Communication*. Some documents are eyeing a goal, but some are simply to inform the audience. For example, an email can be about a change in a policy, a help manual for a particular program or facility, or changes in the organizational structure. These papers are expected to be clear to avoid misinterpretation.
- 3) *Negative Communication*. There are inevitable events in the workplace that may not be pleasing to everyone. Writing about them requires careful planning. “For example, a human resources specialist might have to write a letter about a layoff or severance package. In this type of communication, the writer should use a firm but empathetic tone and write succinctly to provide essential information in a direct manner.”
- 4) *Persuasive Communication*. This refers to proposals or applications for a government grant, funding, or partnership. Lines should be convincing and positive to make an impression and hook the recipient to consider or act on the plan.

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